

Forms handlers too narrow in scope

Every business generates mountains of forms.

If sorting all this paperwork out is taking too much time, try two new forms-handling programs. They could help streamline this repetitive chore. One of the programs even has extensive design capabilities.

While the idea sounds good, however, are the programs really simpler and easier to use than your trusty typewriter?

To find out, I reviewed two products that are widely advertised for this task.

■ Blankity Blank! starts with the premise that you're already comfortable with your word processor and its mail-merge functions. Through menus and on-screen prompts, the program ensures that every blank or "field" is filled in and in the correct order.

It does not, however, have any form design features. That task is left for your word processing program.

■ FormWorx, in contrast, is a full-blown forms design and data input program. Unlike Blankity

BUSINESS TOOLS



Hillel Segal

Blank!, it doesn't work hand-in-hand with your existing word processing program.

Instead, this stand-alone program gives you the resources for "drawing" all the lines and

boxes of any form as well as offering validation and storage of the data generated by that form.

The simpler Blankity Blank! program treats every mail-merge document as a questionnaire. When you want to add data to your mail-merge file, it will prompt you, field by field, to "answer" the appropriate question. This could be done either in real time, as in telephone surveys, or in batches.

The more complicated FormWorx is actually two programs: Draw & Edit and Fill & File.

The Draw & Edit part gives you a large dot-filled grid to draw on.

With the aid of pull-down menus you can slap together lines and boxes, labels and headings. While the FormWorx manual — at a hefty 450 pages — seems depressingly big, the line drawing features are relatively easy to figure out from the on-screen menus.

Both programs have built-in math functions, allowing an invoice form to automatically calculate costs on the basis of quantity and unit price.

On the downside, each program has a very narrow audience.

For simple forms that are not used more than once or twice a day, it's far easier to continue to use a typewriter than to go through all of the trouble of setting up and using these programs.

For more complicated forms, or ones used more frequently, most businesses can utilize their database programs.

These programs only make sense if your situation falls in between. Finally, to fully use a program like FormWorx requires considerable expertise. Dealing with complex printer installations and

mastering FormWorx's optional programming language are beyond the skills of the average office worker.

■ The Bottom Line: If your company reuses the same forms very often, and you're tired of typing them, you may wish to consider some streamlining with Blankity Blank!.

Because it works directly with your word processor and its mail-merge functions, it cuts down on the new commands you need to learn.

Otherwise, I wouldn't bother with either program.

Blankity Blank! costs \$99.50 and is available from Softstream Technologies Inc., 2740 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood, Fla., 33020.

FormWorx costs \$149 from FormWorx Corp., Reservoir Place, 1601 Trapelo Road, Waltham, Mass. 02154.

Hillel Segal's weekly column evaluates gadgets, small-computer hardware and software, seminars and books designed to enhance business productivity.